DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 184 482 **HE 012 531**

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TITLE Grade Inflation: Magnitude, Causes, and Consequences.
PUB DATE 80
NOTE 12p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Standards; *College Students; Educational History; *Grade Inflation; *Grade Point Average; Higher Education; Political Influences; *Social Change

ABSTRACT

The extent of grade inflation at the college level, possible causes of the phenomenon, and its potential consequences for colleges and universities and the individual student are discussed. Grade inflation since 1965 has been attributed to the following possible causes: grade point averages (GPA) have increased because of real changes in high school and college student achievement; there have been demographic and institutional policy changes that could have affected GPA's independent of changes in grading standards; prior to 1965 university and college faculties were largely unresponsive with respect to their grading practices to the increasing competency of the student body; and significant social, political, and institutional changes have occurred in the United States during the period of grade inflation. A study conducted by Birnbaum (1977) to test the first two general explanations of grade inflation is described. It is suggested that the most plausible explanation is the one which posits that significant societal and institutional change has resulted in an erosion of traditional grading standards. It is suggested that grade inflation may have resulted from leniency in grading during the Vietnam war period, when college students in good academic standing were able to obtain draft deferments. Additionally, the Civil Rights Movement and the influx of academically unprepared minority students into colleges that lacked resources for remedial programs may have been a contributing cause of grade inflation. (SW)

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GRADE INFLATION: MAGNITUDE, CAUSES, AND CONSEQUENCES

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1980

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Introduction

Much recent attention, both in the popular and professional literature, has been devoted to the considerable rise in undergraduate college and university grades which has occurred nationwide in the last decade (Taylor, 1975). Many observers view this trend with alarm, assuming that it reflects on erosion of grading standards. Growing awareness of a parallel decrease in scores on standardized college entrance examinations (e.g., American College Test, Scholastic Aptitude Test) has added fuel to the alarmist's fire (Taylor, 1975). A recent quote from a college professor probably summarizes the belief of many concerning college grading practices: "A "C" is an indication of attendance, a "B" an indication of attendance with work done, and an "A" an indication of attendance with work done on time" (Birnbaum, 1977, p. 520). This paper represents an attempt to determine the magnitude of so-called "grade inflation" at the college level, possible causes of the phenomenon, and its potential consequences for colleges and universities and the individual student.

Grade inflation can be defined as "the process in which a defined level of academic achievement results in a higher grade than awarded to that level of achievement in the past" (Birnbaum, 1977, p. 522). In other words, if students of the same ability and performance levels obtain higher grades than previously in the same courses, grade inflation has taken place. It should be noted that if college students today generally have a higher ability level, or better basic academic skills, or perhaps are typically taking different courses than students of 15 years ago, and are receiving higher grades as a result, grade inflation has not necessarily occurred. Also, as Birnbaum (1977) has succinctly pointed out, an important distinction between grade inflation and grade point average inflation should be made. The concept "grade point average" refers, of course, to the mean performance rating of a number of courses that are combined for statistical purposes. GPA increases could be due to the reasons mentioned above, but could also be due to changes in institutional policies which, for example, might permit a student to drop courses in which F or D grades were distinct possibilities, or to take "difficult" courses pass-fail, or repeat a course and have only the higher grade included in the GPA calculation. The point of this discussion is simply that changes in grades and GPA's over the last 10-15 years do not

necessarily imply a relaxation of grading standards.

Magnitude

Most of the empirical investigations of so-called grade inflation have concerned GPA increases occurrring since the early or mid-1960's. These studies are consistent in indicating substantial increases in GPA's over this time period (Suslow, 1976, Never and Kojahn, 1973, Scully, 1975). A Michigan State researcher, for example, found an average GPA increase of approximately .50 at 197 colleges and universities between 1960 and 1973 (reported in Taylor, 1974). Scully (1975) found an increase from 2.47 to 2.94 at 15 institutions between 1960 and 1974. These studies suggest that GPA's began to increase nationwide around 1965. Numerous studies of single colleges and universities conducted since the mid-1970's suggest that GPA inflation has continued to increase (see, for example, late 1970's issues of The Chronicles of Higher Education).

Possible Causes

Findings such as these have led to the simplistic (common sense) explanation that an erosion of grading standards has occurred for whatever reasons, and therefore a stiffening of the standards is obviously called for. However, as indicated above, alternative explanations are theoretically possible. "Grading is an exceptionally complex phenomenon, taking place in organizations that are themselves subject to myriad external social forces, and faced internally with changes in student grading policies, faculty perceptions, and curriculum, all of which may have significant impact upon the formal distribution of grades" (Birnbaum, 1977, p. 523). A consideration of the various explanations of grade inflation follows, and will serve to underscore the degree of complexity of the issue reflected in Birnbaum's statement.

One possible explanation is that GPA's have increased because of real changes in high school and college student achievement. This explanation assumes that university grading is absolute rather than relative: if students learned more or are learning more their grades should have improved.

A second explanation is that there have been demographic and institutional policy changes which could have affected GPA's independent of changes in grading standards. For example, the sex ratio on campuses has changed nationwide over the last decade: a higher proportion of students are now women (Bredemeier, 1978). Given the reality of sex roles, this development suggests the possibility of changes in the proportion of students in the various majors,

changes in the courses taken, and perhaps changes in academic motivation (college women have traditionally earned slightly higher grades than men: Lavin, 1965). Also, some change in the distribution of students in the various majors may have occurred nationwide independent of sex ration changes. No national data appears to exist here, but Birnbaum (1977) reports significant changes in the distribution of students by major at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh between 1968-69 and 1974-75. Majors in education, music and physical education increased 22% whereas majors in English, history, geography, political science, economics, and sociology decreased 24%. Studies of single institutions have indicated that students majoring in certain areas typically earn higher grades than those majoring in other areas (Goldman, et al, 1978).

Changes in curriculum, it is argued, might have affected GPA's; changes such as reduction in required courses during the freshman and sophomore years, a reduction in required courses for majors, increased opportunity for students to design their own majors, and greater use of self-paced auto-tutorial methodologies. Some evidence exists that these can affect GPA's (Suslow, 1976).

Finally, it has been suggested that changes in institutional policies, particularly the availability of the pass-fail option under certain conditions, and permitting withdrawal from courses at virtually anytime during the semester or quarter without punitive consequences, could have resulted in increased GPA's even if grading standards had remained constant.

A third general explanation for the grade inflation phenomenon argues that prior to 1965, university and college faculties were largely unresponsive, with respect to their grading practices, to the increasing competency of the student body. The recent substantial increase in GPA's is simply seen as a belated adjustment, a counterreaction, to very stringent standards. This "counterreaction" has created controversy only because it has occurred in such a short period of time. To elaborate: student aptitude test scores and other indicators of ability and achievement increased somewhat between 1951 and 1968 (Birnbaum, 1977). However, these increases were not reflected in higher college GPA's. In actuality, some decline in grades in certain departments occurred during this time, creating some consternation in higher education circles by the mid-1960's. Hills and Gladney, (1968) have argued that "if the level of performance of the immediate class is higher than that of previous classes in the professor's experience, (then) the adaptation level, that is,

the level of performance which the professor thinks of as neither particularly good nor particularly bad, shifts upward (emphasis mine) for individual performance of this more proficient class. This could readily explain why other researchers found that as admissions standards rose (in the decade prior to 1965) the average college grade did not rise proportionately". In other words, grading standards are relative, and tend to shift upward or downward with the ability level of classes. Taylor (1975) has suggested that "unresponsiveness" to increased student compentency could have been a response to the emphasis on hard grading standards during the post-Sputnik (1957) period. The "theory" fails to explain, however, why a relatively rapid "belated adjustment" might have occurred in the last decade.

The fourth general explanation emphasizes significant social, political, and institutional changes which have occurred in the U.S. during the period of grade inflation. This theory posits that changes in grading standards have occurred in response to widespread questioning of traditional values in general, and more specifically, to questioning of traditional academic standards. Further development of this explanation will be deferred until after consideration of the evidence pertaining to the previous three.

Only one attempt to systematically and fairly rigorously subject to empirical test the first two general explanations of grade inflation seems to have been made (above). Birnbaum (1977), using data on students from the 1968-69 and 1974-75 academic years at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, tested the following hypotheses:

1. Grade point averages increased because the institution was attracting more able high school graduates;
2. GPA's increased because college student achievement increased and students were learning more;
3. GPA's increased because the sex ratio of students changed: more women were enrolled;
4. GPA's increased because more students majored in areas which traditionally awarded lower grades;
5. GPA's increased because students no longer took the same courses;
6. GPA's increased because students increased their use of pass-fail and/or nonpenalizing withdrawal options.

To test the first two hypotheses, regression equations utilizing 1968-69 data were calculated which enabled the prediction of 1974-75 GPA's. (Predictions were created by using the high school rank (Hyp. #1) and the GRE score in the major area of study (Hyp. #2) as predictor variables in the equations.)

The remaining hypotheses were tested by means of techniques which would require explanations too lengthy to describe here; see Birnbaum, 1977.

Birnbaum found no support for any of the above hypotheses except #6 (grade inflation is related to changes in institutional policies), and in this case the effect was slight. Birnbaum concludes that the grade inflation phenomenon would exist even if these institutional policies had not been altered.

In the absence of other comparable studies, and considering the fact that Birnbaum had an "N" of one (one university), no generalizations are warranged, of course, but Birnbaum's investigation does suggest that the "belated adjustment" or "social change" theories (or a combination thereof) must be turned to for the causes of grade inflation. The nationwide decline in Scholastic Aptitude Test and American College Test scores which characterized the last decade (Taylor, 1975), and the dubious validity of the assumption that university grading is absolute, not relative, cast some additional doubt on the validity of hypotheses 1 and 2. Also, the extent of grade inflation is the last decade calls into question the worth of hypothesis 6, since studies using national samples (e.g., Collins and Nichel, 1974) indicate that pass-fail options are available for any course in only about 15% of the institutions sampled.

The credibility of the "belated adjustment" theory (see above) can be questioned also for several reasons, even though it has not been subjected to direct empirical test:

1. The theory relies heavily on the assumption that standardized achievement/aptitude tests given to high school students in the 1950's and early 1960's were basically valid indicators of (increasing) student "competency." Unless the assumption is made that these tests are no longer valid, the substantial decline in scores which has paralleled the grade inflation trend suggests that facors other than "belated adjustment" are at work;
2. Commensurate increases in high school GPA's during the last decade (combined with the above-mentioned decline in test scores) suggests that grades have changed in response to social forces which have affected the entire formal education system;
3. As it stands, the theory does not adequately explain the rapid rate of grade inflation in the last decade; why such an abrupt change if belated adjustment is a sufficient explanation? The theory is not fully explicated; propositions appear to be missing.

This theory may have some validity, but only in combination with at least some elements of a "social force" explanation. That is, broad societal changes affecting institutions of higher education might have created an educational climate conducive to making "adjustments" in grading.

The "social change" theory posits that grade inflation has occurred during a time period in which significant social changes were affecting the country, changes from which higher education institutions were not immune. It argues that significant changes in grading standards have resulted from the impact of these forces. To elaborate: the era of grade inflation has been largely the era of the Vietnam War and the legitimation of war-related student activism. College students in good academic standing were able to obtain draft deferments during most of the wartime period. Universities were obligated to provide rank-in-class data to the Selective Service System. As a result of these factors, the assigning of grades to male students took on added significance, according to the proponents of this approach. The present authors have often heard it said: "Grading standards were reduced as the war dragged on because many college professors, ideologically opposed to the war anyway, didn't want to be responsible for kids dropping out of school and as a result being dropped into the jungles of Vietnam". The truth of this simplistic assertion cannot be determined, in part because of the confounding effects of other significant events which were occurring simultaneously, and recounted below.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's appears to have been directly or indirectly responsible for the substantial influx of minority students into the higher education system which characterized the period. Unfortunately many of these students lacked the basic academic skills necessary for successful college experiences (Birnbaum, 1977). Many universities lacked the resources, and in some cases, perhaps the commitment to provide the remedial and other services these students required. The Civil Rights Movement probably also increased the sensitivity of faculties to the past injustices suffered by minorities and others relatively poor and powerless. It is probably safe to conclude that, as a result of the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, faculty found themselves making decisions about <u>social justice and social mobility through grading</u>. If true, the climate was conducive to a relaxation of grading standards.

Birnbaum (1977) comments that the War cast doubt on the legitimacy of all traditional authority, not just in the minds of the "activist" students, but also in the minds of many faculty and administrators. Traditional grading norms were undoubtedly not immune from this process. Also, the greater freedom to students to openly criticize institutional policies, and to become involved in decisions previsouly reserved for faculty may have contributed to

changes in grading standards during the late 1960's and early 1970's.

Strictly within the realm of speculation, Suslow (1976) has suggested that the tightening job market for college graduates in many fields which has characterized the 1970's may have contributed to a relaxation of grading standards as the result of faculty wishing to maximize their students' job opportunities. He further suggests that the greater use in the last decade of teaching evaluations which affect personnel decisions may have caused some faculty to give higher grades in order to win student support. Perhaps a significant factor in the area of changes in faculty behavior concerns the large influx of new faculty which occurred in the decade prior to 1970. According to Blackburn (1976; reported in Birnbaum, 1977) 300,000 professors were appointed between 1960 and 1970, doubling the size of the profession. These newcomers were more likely to come from different socioeconomic, racial and ethnic backgrounds than the incumbents, perhaps contributing to the erosion of traditional grading standards. Also, the influx occurred, of course, at a time of rapid university growth and at a time of considerable social upheaval. These factors may have combined to make internalizing the traditions of the profession more difficult for novice faculty.

Finally, the decade of the 1960's was also marked by changes in university management approaches (Birnbaum, 1977). The greater popularity of cost-benefit analyses and other techniques resulted in organizational resources being allocated more directly on the basis of student enrollment patterns. The subsequent decline in enrollments experienced by many institutions in the 1970's may have contributed to an erosion of traditional grading standards if grading was seen as affecting enrollments (see the Chronicle of Higher Education, 18, April 9, 1979, p.3).

It should be noted that the societal and institutional changes delineated above could have affected (undoubtedly did affect) the sex ratio on campuses, changes in curriculum, changes in the proportions of students in the various majors, and changes in institutional policies, all of which could have affected GPA's. However, as indicated above, the scant existing evidence suggests that these are not sufficient to account for the magnitude of grade inflation in the last decade.

It should also be mentioned that the "social change" theory makes certain key assumptions:

1. That college grading is based on relative, not absolute, criteria;

2. That significant interaction effects among the possible causes of grade inflation mentioned above would probably have had to occur for the observed degree of grade inflation to be adequately accounted for.

In other words, a number of significant changes were occurring more-or-less simultaneously in higher education institutions, changes which were far from mutually exclusive.

The theory implies, of course, that significant "erosion" of traditional grading standards has occurred, largely accounting for the grade inflation phenomenon. It also implies that significant reversal of the trend in the short run might be difficult to accomplish (even given the absence of a controversial war) in the face of continued pressure placed on educational institutions to "solve" the problem of minority poverty, and in light of a projected 1980's decline in student enrollment.

Consequences

Does it really matter if grades rise? The question can be viewed from several angles. Hoyt (1966) reviewed considerable research on the association between GPA and "success" in business, teaching, engineering, medicine, and "scientific" research, and found little relationship. Partly on the basis of findings such as this, several investigators (Davidson, 1975, Taylor, 1974) have argued that economic and political consequences of grade inflation may be more substantial than educational ones. They suggest that employing organizations (and graduate schools) will rely more heavily on indicators other than grades to evaluate "potential" and ability, such as standardized achievement/aptitude tests, the academic reputations of universities, and what is uphimistically called the "old boy" (informal placement) network (Affirmative Action guidelines notwithstanding).

Many able students would obviously be disadvantaged if these suppositions are correct. Rampant grade inflation also undoubtedly places the truly outstanding student at a disadvantage in another respect: his/her GPA is a less reliable indicator of outstanding classroom performance than was the case in previous decades. Also "dean's list" and similar means of identifying and giving recognition to outstanding students become meaningless or nearly so.

With respect to consequences for colleges and universities, (as well as students) one possibility occurs to the present author: the entire American formal education system is structured so as to reward extrinsic (grade) motivation. Most students have probably internalized the appropriate norms

long before admission to college. If traditional grading criteria have largely broken down without accompanying (compensatory) structural and ideological change, the question of whether students are "learning as much in their courses as in the past can be raised. Might declining Graduate Record Examination scores (Birnbaum, 1977) reflect less assimilation of knowledge and academic skills than previously acquired, due to lessened motivation to learn these skills? (An alternate possibility is that this decline simply reflects changes in majors and courses taken by undergraduates.)

What of the future? Will grade inflation continue to spiral? Probably not; a "ceiling" may already have been reached. Grade inflation has been so pronounced that "D" and "F" grades have evidently become endangered species. Faculty, however, undoubtedly need to believe that their grading practices are based at least to some extent on discriminatory judgments (Birnbaum, 1977). The system is not likely to change to the point where judgments cannot be made. If many universities have reached the point of offering only two alternatives -- "A" and "B" -- in their upper division courses (as some investigators maintain) perhaps a "ceiling" has been reached or is about to be reached.

In sum, this paper has briefly examined the magnitude, proposed causes, and possible consequences of university grade inflation. It has been shown that GPA's have increased substantially since 1965 nationwide. The existing theories of causation were examined and evaluated. The explanation which posits that significant societal and institutional change in the last two decades has resulted in an erosion of traditional grading standards was shown to be the most plausible, given scant empirical evidence. Consequences of grade inflation for the occupational placement of students and for educational institutions were briefly explored.

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